DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 143 SO 030 179

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TITLE A Liberal Education for Business Ethics.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Education; *Business Responsibility; *College Curriculum; *Ethical Instruction; Ethics; General Education; Higher Education; Moral Values
IDENTIFIERS *Business Ethics

ABSTRACT

The crisis in business ethics does not stem so much from the inability to distinguish between right and wrong as it does from the habits people develop over time. Choice in today's world seems to conflict with ethical beliefs. Ethics involves more than making choices; it also involves learning to live with results and accepting responsibility for decision making. The choices one makes have a meaningful impact and corporate United States misses the point in the current approach to the ethics crisis. By marketing ethics as good business, corporate United States does more to exacerbate the problem than to cure it. How can higher education teach ethics in ways that force students beyond exercises in problem-solving and decision-making? One method is by reversing thinking about ethics; i.e., to prescribe desired behaviors instead of proscribing unwanted behaviors. This means concentrating on what is moral and not on what is merely legal. Another method is by bringing liberal education into the business curriculum, by adapting traditional material to non-traditional situations, and by reducing the emphasis on careerism in education. (NL)

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A Liberal Education for Business Ethics

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"A Liberal Education for Business Ethics:"

--by--

Dr. William A. O'Brien

". . . good ethics is money in your pocket." That, suggests the Nation's Business in a 1987 [August] cover story, is what the so-called "Ethical Edge" is all about. In a world where getting a leg up on the other guy is usually the difference between success and failure, it often emerges as the principal difference between winners and losers. Doing the right thing pays. Even when it causes financial loss in the short term, it helps attract steady customers, the best talent, and the public's good will in the long term. In business, even more than in other pursuits, the adage is true -- "what goes around comes around."

Here in a nutshell is corporate America's "bottom line" to a nation desperate for an antidote to sleaze -- ethics is "money in the bank." Without question this appeal to self-interest is well-intentioned. Though simplistic and painfully pragmatic, it does suggest a strategy that is credible. Publicists like Tom Peters and Robert Naisbitt are doing all they can to promote it. Our need to compete helps drive it. But given the severity of the ethics crisis we face, it is hardly encouraging. In fact, it is downright disturbing. It presumes that society's only recourse to behavior gone awry is an appeal to the very culprit many believe spawned the problem in the first place. And it implies that human character, once formed, cannot be changed. It is wrong on both counts, and corporate America's ability to lead our war against sleaze suffers because of it.

Despite first impressions that die hard in the face of popular assumptions to the contrary, we are beginning to realize that there is more to our ethics crisis than imperfect souls suddenly oblivious to the constraints of a final reckoning. That "you-may-get-away-with-it-now-but-you'll-pay-for-it-later" attitude remains quite popular, for it squares with the "eye-for-an-eye" approach to justice most of us grew up with and want desperately to believe in. It is our paradigm. That human nature is holding its own in cultures other than our own, however, is its anomoly.

Most of us realize too that today's ethics crisis does not stem so much from an inability to distinguish between right and wrong, as from the bad habits and inclinations that people develop over a lifetime. From years spent "making it" in a world that makes it so much easier to choose wrong over right. Each of us, it seems, must constantly define his own "bottom line." More often than not, that choice in today's world seems to conflict with what that face we see in the mirror every morning tells us is right.

Ethics involves more than making choices. It involves learning to live with results, engaging sensitivities and activating the kind of passions that responsibility for one's decisions requires. It is that constant adjustment to circumstances we help create by the choices we make that forms habits and attitudes, that sharpens sensibilities, that fashions character, and that ultimately determines what our next decision will be.

Choices between right and wrong that have a meaningful impact on those who make them come from the heart, not the head. They touch conscience far more than they do the conscious. They involve more soul than intellect, more spirit than common sense. For it is in the human heart that virtue resides. There that character is shaped. There that attitudes and habits are formed, and sensibilities developed. It stands to reason, then, that there and only there can we hope to make real strides in our war on sleaze.

In reality, then, corporate America is missing the point in its approach to the ethics crisis. It is, to quote James Madison in a polemic aimed at those inclined to confuse what is expedient with what is right, "yield[ing] too readily to the niceties of forensic reasoning," mistaking "the bark for the pith of the business." By marketing ethics simply as good business, corporate America is doing more to exascerbate the problem than to cure it. When we need most to be looking for ways to strengthen virtue, business has chosen to treat it as the means for reaching very selfish ends. Thereby it strengthens the belief that reason alone drives behavior, and that common sense, cold calculation, and a primordial concern for self weigh most heavily in the ethical decisions people make. They do not.

But how do we touch people where they feel? And how do we do it in ways that will counter self-interest? Or at least temper it? More to the point, how do we teach ethics in ways that force students beyond the detached, dispassionate exercises in problem-solving and decision-making that constitute so much of today's instruction in business ethics?

The answer is two-fold. It lies first in reversing our thinking about ethics. In directing people's attention toward doing what is right, rather than highlighting the consequences of doing what is wrong. In exchanging the "thou shalt nots" of the Ten Commandments for the "thou shalts" of the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of proscribing behavior we don't want, we must begin to prescribe that we do want. That means replacing negatives with positives in corporate codes and conflict-of-interest laws. It means concentrating on what is moral, not what is legal. What is proper, not what is permitted. It means promoting the spirit of the law, not its letter. Reserving society's greatest rewards for those who achieve success within the law, not in spite of it. Or even worse, from it.

All of this rests, of course, on a premise that corporate America's "ethics pays" approach rejects -- that education can change human character. A shift in emphasis from half-empty bottles to half-full ones is somewhat pointless, then, until we address the key issue of ethics education.

If we are truly to touch attitudes, heighten sensitivities, broaden perspectives -- yes, even alter behavior, we must find ways to make students active participants instead of passive observers in the moral choices we want them to confront. In a word, they have to care! Become real players making real decisions in real situations, alert to all the hazards and all the possibilities that await all of those involved. Until we can do that, subject matter, regardless of how challenging or how ethically charged are the questions it raises, can have only a limited, short-term effect on those who study it. Choices remain just that, choices -- personally unimportant, with very little riding on the outcome.

The situation calls for a drastic change in the way we look at subject matter. No longer can we treat content as important in its own right, not if we want the kind of results that occur only when students actively engage the dilemmas life poses. We must begin to choose content more carefully -- concentrating on the kinds of questions it raises, not on the answers it provides. On the moral conflicts it sparks, not the ones it resolves. On the doubt it promotes, not the certainty it promises. The perspective it offers, not the loose ends it eliminates. In short, it means bringing liberal education into the business curriculum -- adapting some very traditional materials to some very non-traditional situations.

Some examples? How about going back into Plato's cave, this time for some straight talk about the real world and what passes for it? Or better yet, about how to convey truth to people who really don't want to hear it? Talk about a

need for leadership! Or communication skills! And how about joining Virgil and Dante on their journey through Hell for some first-hand contact with souls in real need of coping skills, people whose goal-setting deficiencies got them into serious trouble? Or how about sitting in on the trial of Socrates -- and finding out how hard marching to your own drum can really be? Or in Birmingham Jail with Dr. King -- arguing strategy with someone convinced that procedure doesn't work, only end-runs around it? Or in Pandemonium with Milton -- chairing a debate of fallen angels on how best to re-take Heaven? Or in Steinbeck's California labor camp -- quizzing Casy on how to know truth when you think you've finally found it?

Efforts to fine-tune ethics instruction for the "real world," to replace the abstract with the practical, have blinded us to what has made men sensitive to right and wrong for generations. The result? Our students aren't confronting the kinds of sources that raise the right questions. Nor are they engaging the great minds that have wrestled with those questions in the past.

Plato tells us that this kind of instruction will work. It is, he claims, the "art which will affect conversion" from darkness to light. It does "not implant the faculty of sight," he cautions, "for that exists already," but it will help to turn it in the right direction. Our efforts to implant "sight" have been fruitless. A turn in the right direction is what we need right now.

Somehow we lost our bearings when we began to stress careerism in education. The ethics crisis suggests that it is time to get back on course.

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